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Test-Taking or Not in the Early Years

By Anne Santa, *School Psychologist*

with Beth Handler and Beth O'Mara, *Learning Specialists*

How does a test score describe a 5-year-old? Too narrowly and oftentimes unfairly would be Bank Street's answer. From the onset, Bank Street has dedicated its efforts to teach and attend to the needs of the whole child. As a result, our admissions process focuses on getting to know children in the context of their play and their interactions in small groups, as opposed to examining their test scores. Bank Street has a long tradition of observing and recording behavior in order to get to know children, and our mission guides us as we begin to assess the possibility of a good fit between a child and our progressive school. This initial admissions conversation is the beginning of the school and parent partnership, which extends from the admissions process to a child's graduation.

Since 1919, when Bank Street College of Education was known as the Bureau of Educational Experiments and established a nursery school, we have worked hard to admit children who we think are ready to learn in a school that uses active learning characterized by collaboration among children and adults and interactions with a variety of materials and methods. Thus, the learning includes the experiential component of students constructing their own meaning by having to explain their journeys to their conclusions. This is quite different from answering questions on a standardized test on which an answer is either right or wrong, wherein the teacher or assessor is not trained to participate in extended conversations about the reasoning behind children's thinking.

To be ready to learn in a Lower School classroom at Bank Street, a child needs to enjoy others, to be able to talk about his/her own thoughts, feelings and ideas, and to be able to self regulate in an age-appropriate fashion. The social learning that occurs in a progressive school forms a large part of a child's growth, and to determine whether or not Bank Street would be a good fit, it only makes sense that a large part of the admissions process involves social and cooperative experiences. In the process we ask children to spend time playing and executing several teacher-directed tasks in order for the admissions committee to get to know the children. These observations are then shared with parents in order to see similarities and differences between home behavior.

As brain research has borne out, so much of learning is experiential and emotionally based. Children are naturally curious in environments where they feel nurtured, safe and stimulated, and our job as educators is to create those environments. To

learn, work and grow in those environments we look for groups of children with a wide range of interests, temperaments, and a wide representation of backgrounds and cultures. Reducing the admissions process to the measure of a test score would not enable us to accomplish this goal.

In a school where “the whole child” is our focus, we are eager to see what each child brings in terms of passion and gift. At Bank Street, it might be the girl who builds a “stadium” when she transforms her cardboard box for the first grade’s Box City, or the boy who loves to talk and write books about what he is learning. These individual flames of interest and skill are also what we look for in Admissions and what we strive to cultivate in a each child’s school years. No test can tell that story.